Robert's Rules: Suggestions for Writing

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I. Getting It Written

1. **Write fast, in multiple drafts**. Don't try too hard; you can always go over it again.

2. **On the first draft, just slap something down**. Don't worry if it's patchy, less than well organized, or roughly worded. You can fill in the gaps, restructure the argument, and refine the prose later; to start, you need something to work with.

3. **Edit and re-edit**. Make numerous passes, not spending too long on any one. Be content, on each pass, with improvements; don't aim for perfection.

5. **Don't spin your wheels**. If stuck, try another section or another project entirely, then return later. Writing, in this respect, is like solving a crossword puzzle. Related passages, akin to intersecting squares, may help you see how the problem passage must run, and in any case the diversion may help you see it with a fresh eye.

6. **Don't become too attached to anything you've written**. If a possible improvement strikes you, try it out. You can always change it back.

7. **Keep your focus wide**. Problems with a sentence may really be problems with the paragraph; problems with a paragraph may really be problems with the section. If a piece doesn't fit, it may be because the whole is poorly organized. When having trouble, step back and look at the larger unit.

8. **When you're writing well, write**. To varying degrees, all writers are streaky. Like tennis players, we are sometimes but not always "in the zone"; like basketball players, sometimes but not always "unconscious." When the words are flowing, keep writing, even at the cost of putting off other things.

9. **Keep in shape**. Also like athletes, writers begin to lose conditioning after not exercising for more than two or three days. Try to write something—it needn't be much—every day.

II. Writing It Well

1. **Be clear**. The object of writing is communication. To that end:

2. **Be concise**. **Avoid unnecessary words**. Strunk and White (pp. 23-25) is useful (and marvelously succinct) on this point. Spend words as though they were money and you were a miser. **If in doubt, leave it out**. Relatedly:

3. **Trust the reader**. Assume he or she is intelligent, knows at least what any intelligent lay reader should know, and is paying attention. Thus:

4. **Avoid saying things that go without saying**. Unnecessary thoughts, even economically expressed, are no better than unnecessary words. Nobody reading a paper on U.S. Senate election campaigns needs to be told what the Senate it is, what its members do as legislators, or why it is important … by way of random example. And:

5. **Never say anything twice**. Well, hardly ever. Very occasionally, in long manuscripts, a very brief reminder—rarely more than a clause—may be desirable, but generally speaking if you said it clearly the first time, the reader will remember.

6. **Watch your diction**. If unsure of a word's exact meaning, look it up. The best sources are the *OED* and *Webster's Third International* (see below).

7. **Try for color (but not too much)**. Use similes, metaphors, and other tropes. Be open to the unusual but telling word. Be careful not to overdo it, however; most of the phrases will have to be literal, most of the words ordinary.

8. **Quote sparingly**. You should be trying to combine what you have read into an amalgam uniquely your own. In general, therefore, use the thoughts, not the words—giving due credit, of course. The main exceptions are when the precise words matter (as when you have caught an author saying something questionable or wrong) or are so delicious as to constitute a grace note.

9. **Keep your sentences forward-moving**. Excessively long or numerous qualifications are best hived off into other sentences, if really necessary, or simply deleted, if not.

10. At the same time, **combine short sentences for economy**. Trimming unnecessary words and thoughts may leave you with a series of very short, simple sentences, which can usually be combined, usually with some further savings of words. See III.B.30 below.

11. **Avoid the passive voice**, except to de-emphasize the actor for reasons of genuine unimportance or diplomacy.

12. **Keep transitions as simple as possible**. Lengthy passages describing the organization of the argument are a sign of a badly organized argument. A phrase, at most, is usually enough. The most elegant transitions are implicit.

13. **Use headings**. Headings and subheadings highlight the structure of the argument and reduce the need for explicit transitions in the text.

14. **Use paragraphs as units of thought**. Keep every paragraph to a single thought, and consolidate every occurrence of any one thought in a single paragraph. Mingling the distinct thoughts *A* and *B* in one paragraph or raising the single thought *A* in multiple paragraphs obscures the line of argument.

15. **Keep paragraphs manageably short**. Most should be between one-quarter and one-half of a page. Anything more than three-quarters of a page is too long. The point of paragraphing is to help convey the organization of your argument, and breaks that are too few and far between do not help. Note that honoring this rule need never mean violating the preceding one, since what constitutes a single thought is inevitably a matter of definition. You can always find a sensible place to break a paragraph that is too long (although this may require some prior rearranging if it is badly organized internally).

III. More Specific Do's and Don't's

A. Diction

1. **Words and Phrases to Avoid**:

Utilize. Pure educationese. Strike it from your vocabulary. Use "use" instead.

In terms of. Almost always wordy and awkward. "In" will often suffice.

In order to, *in order for*. The first two words are almost always unnecessary. "To" or "for" is generally enough.

The fact that. "That" will often suffice; if not, try another phrasing.

Upon. A usually pompous near-synonym for "on," which is almost always preferable.

All of the. "All the Republicans" says the same thing as "all of the Republicans," while saving a word.

There is, *there are*. Occasionally appropriate, but usually flaccid. Try rewording, in the active voice. You'll usually save several words and gain much vigor.

Oftentimes. Archaic and pretentious. Use "often" or "frequently."

Throughout. Almost always sheer nimiety. If you've said "Witcover stresses the importance of money," do you really need to add "throughout the book"? Only if it is for some reason essential to make clear that he does so more or less evenly from beginning to end as opposed to concentrating the relevant discussion in certain chapters. That will be the case—just about never.

2. **"Media" and "data" are plural**. (The singulars are "medium" and "datum.") "The media *is* biased" is therefore incorrect (grammatically, if not factually).

3. **The correct idiom to indicate the first of series of related ideas is "to begin *with*,"** not simply "to begin," without the "with."

4. **The formulation "as far as *x* is concerned" requires the last two words**. "As far as" without "is concerned" is incorrect.

5. **Be careful with "situation," "area," and "aspect,"** all much abused as catch-alls. "Situation" most commonly means the circumstances of the moment (or less commonly a physical location or site). "Area," apart from spatial meanings, denotes a field of activity. An "aspect" of something is a side, face, or phase of it. If what you are trying to say doesn't fit these definitions, don't use these words! Note that "area" and especially "aspect" are frequently misused for "respect," in the sense of some particular or detail. For example: "Successful campaigners need to be socially polished, and Jones was perfectly adequate in this *respect*"—not *aspect* or *area*! Note too that "aspect" must almost always be followed by a prepositional phrase indicating what it is an aspect *of*, as in "aspects *of Jones's campaign* were poorly organized."

6. **Do not confuse "begging" with "leaving," "raising," or "inviting" a question**. Students writing the former almost always mean the latter. To *beg* a question is to hinge an argument on an assumption just as questionable as the conclusion it is intended to support. The argument's validity therefore remains at issue. If I say that capital punishment does not deter murder because few potential murderers consider the possible consequences, that begs the question of just what proportion of potential murderers actually ignore the possible consequences. A special but common case is when the assumption *is* in fact the conclusion, making the argument circular. Under conventional definitions, the argument that cannibalism is immoral because it is immoral to eat people (an example taken from Follett) begs the question in this more specialized sense, assuming precisely what it claims to establish. By contrast, a statement whose own validity is not presently at issue *leaves*, *raises*, or *invites* a question when it opens the door to some other, *further* issue. Gore's narrowly losing several states like Tennessee and Arkansas where he did little to counter Bush's advertising and appearances, a statement whose truth is not at issue, leaves—not begs!—the question of whether he might have won the election if he had spent more resources there and fewer in Florida.

7. **Use "stand," not "stance," for positions on particular issues**. A stance—a more general posture—spans more than one stand.

8. **The adjectival form of "Democrat" is "Democratic."** For some reason, many Republicans have taken to using "Democrat," as in "the Democrat party" or "Democrat policies"—perhaps they have polling data showing that people respond less favorably to "Democrat" than to "Democratic." Partisan advantage does not justify bad grammar.

9. **Prefer pronouns to nouns, other things being equal**. Unnecessarily repeating names or other nouns is tedious. If you are clearly talking about Joe Clark, you should use "he," "him," and "his" instead of "Clark" or "Clark's" as long as the referent is clear.

10. **Only refer to people by first as well as second name the first time you mention them (if then)**. After that, the second name will do. In papers about the election between Joe Clark and Chip Jones, the words "Joe" and "Chip" should occur no more than once apiece. The first names of cited authors needn't be used even once. The "Ezekiel" in "Ezekiel Smith shows that pigs really can fly" is unnecessary.

11. **Favor the possessive**. "The other team's strategy" is usually preferable, on grounds of economy, to "the strategy of the other team."

12. **Don't use *amount* (either the word or the concept) for *number***. "Clark made a considerable amount of mistakes" is wrong; he made a considerable *number* of them. And if he improved his judgment over the course of the campaign, he made *fewer*, not *less*, of them. (The antonymous comparative, *more*, is the same for both number and amount.)

13. **Don't be afraid to use demonstrative pronouns like "this" and "these" for complex antecedents**—clauses, sentences, paragraphs, or still larger swaths of text. For example: "The habitual use of the active voice, however, makes for forcible writing. *This* is not only in narrative concerned principally with action but in writing of any kind" (Strunk and White, p. 18, italics mine). "This's" referent here is the entire first sentence. Do be sure, however, as Strunk and White go on to caution, that the referent is clear.

14. **Don't use "might" for "may" (or vice versa)**. Both convey possibility, but *may*'s possibility is present and unconditional, whereas *might*'s is past, conditional, or both (and in that case *counterfactual*). Thus "Al Gore may be the Democratic nominee again in 2004" (present, unconditional); but "Even after blanketing the state with anti-Social-Security ads, Clark might still have won" (past); "If it rains, I might go home" (conditional); and "If the Iraq War had been going better, the Republicans might not have lost so many congressional seats in 2006" (counterfactual).

15. **Don't use "i.e" for "e.g" (or vice versa)**. *I.e.* is short for "*id est*," Latin for "that is." Use it when restating for greater precision or spelling out an immediate implication. (But remember II.4 above!) *E.g.* is short for "*exempli gratia*," Latin for "for example." Use it when offering an example. E.g. [correct usage]: "Gore's winning a plurality of the popular vote and arguably deserving to have been awarded Florida's electoral votes gave him a moral victory. I.e. [sardonically correct usage], he lost."

B. Grammar and (Mostly) Style

1. **Put what you most want to emphasize at the end**. Write, "Jones won but made mistakes," if you want to emphasize the mistakes, but "Jones made mistakes but won," if you want to emphasize that he won. The example here is of a sentence, but the point applies to units large and small—to phrases and clauses, paragraphs and sections.

2. **Put what you next most want to emphasize at the beginning**. The sentence, "Studying the poll results by county, Jones decided to put the bulk of his effort into Sitting Bull," emphasizes the studying of the poll results and the choice of Sitting Bull, rather than the act of choosing or that it was Jones doing so. Compare "Jones, studying the poll results by county, decided to put the bulk of his effort into Sitting Bull." Now the emphasis, aside from Sitting Bull, is on Jones.

3. **Use parallel constructions to highlight similarities and differences**. Take the example cited by Johnson (p. 80): "He always had a secret yearning for a more contemplative life, she for a life of toil and accomplishment." They both always had secret yearnings, but different ones.

4. **Elide as much as possible in parallel constructions**. In the example immediately above, a second "always had a secret yearning" is unnecessary. Its omission makes the sentence clearer and stronger.

5. **Don't be afraid to put prepositions wherever they would naturally fall in speech, including the ends of clauses or sentences**. Says Fowler, "'That depends on what they are cut with' is not improved by conversion to 'that depends on with what they are cut'" (p. 474). Similarly, Churchill is reputed to have described such contortions as "the sort of English up with which I will not put."

6. **Use complex structures (sparingly) to emphasize the subject and the thought**. Thomas Paine wrote, "These are the times that try men's souls," not "these times try men's souls," because he wanted to emphasize that it was *these* as opposed to other times that try men's souls and because he wanted the entire thought to stand out. (See Richard M. Weaver, *A Rhetoric and Composition Handbook*, p. 172.)

7. **An especially economical, forceful, and therefore useful construction is the predicate compounded of disparate elements, separated by a comma**. Most compound predicates are sufficiently homogeneous to do without the comma: "She thought little of Kerry and voted for Bush." But when the second element is sufficiently different (perhaps parenthetical), the comma is necessary: "She mused about Vietnam, and voted for Bush." On the general point, see Johnson, p. 67.

8. **Compound complements, like compound predicates, need separating by commas when the elements are sufficiently different in significance**. The comma signals the difference. For example: "All this was sad, and true of Clark's campaign too." This too is an especially economical, forceful, and therefore useful construction.

9. **Don't be afraid to begin sentences with "but."** In fact, beginning with "but" is a good way to indicate the opposition of what follows to what has preceded. Use "but" for stronger oppositions, "however" for weaker ones. (See III.B.11, two points down, however, on the placement of "however.")

10. **Be careful, on the other hand, about beginning sentences with "and."** Though perfectly acceptable, beginning with "and" lends enormous emphasis to what follows and should therefore be reserved for sentences you truly wish to emphasize.

11. ***Do not* begin sentences with "however" as a conjunctive adverb conveying opposition**. Consider, for example, the ungainliness of the second sentence in the following: "Most Americans professed distaste for negative advertising. However, Bush succeeded in narrowing his deficit in the polls." Relocating the "however" to follow "succeeded" (preceded by an additional comma, of course) makes a distinct improvement. (See also Strunk and White, pp. 48-49.) Note, however [an example of proper placement], that this stricture does not apply to "however" as a regular adverb, as in the sentence, "However stuffed, he could always find room for tabbouli." By the same token:

12. **Do not begin sentences with "also," meaning "in addition," or "therefore."** "Also" as a regular adverb, as in "Also attending was our campaign manager," is fine; but "Also, we stressed the state of the economy" is inelegant. Substitute "in addition" or move the "also" later in the sentence, as in "We also stressed the state of the economy." "Therefore," like "however," should be moved to the interior; at the beginning, try "hence," "thus," or "consequently."

13. **Use "as," not "like," to introduce clauses.** "Like I say" is a solecism. No educated person should be caught dead writing (or saying) it. "*As* I say" is correct. The legitimate use of "like" is to introduce nouns and nominal phrases: "Urban counties, like Travis or Dade, tend to have larger bureaucracies."

14. **Be careful about the placement of "only,"** which should be as close as possible to the word or phrase it is intended to modify. In the last sentence of III.B.23, below, the "only" in the first clause goes just before "once," not between "you" and "need."

15. **Don't split infinitives**. "Clark decided to heavily stress the issue" should be "Clark decided to stress the issue heavily." Other sentences may take greater rearranging, but split infinitives can always be avoided—and should be, as offenses to both eye and ear.

16. **Avoid phrases like "I think" and "in my opinion," except to mark opinions that are especially debatable**. The context should be enough to mark the assertion as opinion.

17. **Prefer *who* to *that* as the relative pronoun for people**: Say "a candidate who campaigns hard," not "a candidate that campaigns hard."

18. **Use *which* (or *who*) as the relative pronoun for nonrestrictive clauses, *that* (or *who*) as the relative pronoun for restrictive ones**. (See Strunk and White, p. 59.) To illustrate the difference, the nonrestrictive clause in "the election, which the Democrats won in a landslide" is

a way of adding information about some specified election. For this purpose, use "which," preceded by a comma. The restrictive clause in "the election that the Democrats won in a landslide" is a way of specifying the election (the one the Democrats won in a landslide). For this purpose, use "that," with no comma.

19. These next several rules (III.B.19-III.B.23) detail small but frequently useful ways of saving words. The first is to **omit the relative pronoun (*that*) in restrictive clauses involving a new subject when you can do so without losing clarity**. To continue the example of III.B.19, "the election the Democrats won in a landslide" (without the *that*) is sufficient. It's only one word, but the savings add up.

20. **In restrictive clauses involving no new subject, consider replacing the relative pronoun (*that*) and verb with a participle**. For example, "The party that generally benefits from unionization is the Democrats" can be shortened to "The party generally benefiting from unionization is the Democrats."

21. **Consider deleting the relative pronoun (*which* or *who*) and verb from nonrestrictive clauses involving no new subject and the verb "to be,"** thus making the clause into an appositive. For example, "Jesse Ventura, who had previously been a professional wrestler, decided to run for Governor" becomes "Jesse Ventura, previously a professional wrestler, decided to run for Governor." Similarly, "Fund-raising, which was the campaign's most pressing need, consumed most of its time" becomes "Fund-raising, the campaign's most pressing need, consumed most of its time."

22. **Omit the "then" in "if ... then" statements**, unless exceptionally complicated. Almost never is it necessary.

23. **Omit context-setting words and phrases once the context has been established**. You don't ever need to say "in the 2006 election" in a paper or passage clearly about the 2006 election. You don't ever need to use more than one word (typically, "simulation" or "Tarragon") to refer to the computer simulation game depicting the U.S. Senate election campaign between Joe Clark and Chip Jones in the fictional state of Tarragon, once you've initially described it. We already know, if you say "simulation," that it's set in Tarragon; if you say "Tarragon," that that's the state in the simulation; and, in either case, that the simulation is a game, concerns a U.S. Senate election, and has candidates named "Joe Clark" and "Chip Jones." In a paper or passage about election campaigns, you need to use the phrase "election campaigns" only once; after that, we know that you're talking about election, not military, commercial advertising, or other campaigns, and the word "campaigns" will suffice.

24. **Confine citations to parentheses or footnotes**. The example of III.A.9 should be reduced to "Pigs really can fly (Smith 1997)" or, if you're less certain, "Pigs, apparently, can fly (Smith 1997)" or, if you're still less certain "Perhaps pigs can really fly (Smith 1997)." The only exceptions occur when you are giving that particular author's work extended discussion, as in a book review or paper challenging or elaborating on it.

25. **Avoid *elegant variation*** (a fault). **Use the same words for the same thought**. "Jones ran short of money, while Clark had plentiful resources" implies a distinction between "resources" and "money." Assuming none, the sentence should read "Jones ran short of money, while Clark had plenty." See Fowler, pp. 148-51.

26. **Avoid statements of the form "all *x* are not *y*."** Taken literally, this means "*no x* is y," a more direct, concise, and therefore better way of putting it. Ninety-nine percent of the time, however, the author who writes "all *x* are not *y*" really means *not all x* are *y*—i.e., that *some x* are not *y*, a distinctly weaker claim. The "not," for this meaning, is in the wrong place. For example, "all women are not feminists" means that no woman is a feminist; the statement should be, rather, "not all women are feminists."

27. **Avoid disagreements in number**. Within sentences, subjects, verbs and pronouns referring to the subject must agree. Across wider expanses of text, pronouns referring back to previous sentences must agree with their referents. Some disagreements are sheer lapses, made likelier by wordiness. Pay attention! Others reflect ignorance of the number of certain common words. You should know that "media" and "data" are plural (see III.A.2) and that "none," nobody," "no one," "any," "anyone," "anybody," "everybody," "everyone," and "each" are singular. Yet others, concerning pronouns, seem to have been motivated by political correctness (although this can be difficult to distinguish from carelessness). Thus:

28. **Never sacrifice grammar or style to political correctness**. The pronouns for individual men and women are "he" and "she," "his" and "her," "him" and "her," "his" and "hers," never "they," their," "them," or "theirs." So: "The candidate must cultivate his personal image." Or "her personal image." Or "his or her personal image." But never "their personal image," since "candidate" is singular. What to do, then, when a singular referent's gender could be either masculine or feminine? The traditional practice of using the masculine form, with "he" to be read as "he or she," strikes many readers as discriminatory. Simply using the feminine form is equally discriminatory, if not more so, in the absence of any standing convention that "she" be read as "he or she." Alternating genders is aesthetically jarring, in addition to impeding understanding by suggesting a difference in meaning where there is none. In the singular, that leaves the disjunctive locutions "he or she," "his or her," etc. Though wordy, these are at least less objectionable than the alternatives. The best advice, however, may be:

29. **When the gender is unknown or could be either masculine or feminine, use the plural whenever possible**. So, to revise the example above, "Candidates must cultivate their personal images," which finesses the issue.

30. **When subject and object differ in number, the verb takes the number of the subject**. Thus: "His real problem *was* [not were] his numerous gaffes." Do not shy away from

constructions of this sort, combining a singular subject with a plural object or vice versa. Inexpert writers, uncertain what to do, often try phrasing their way around them, almost inevitably adding words and subtracting clarity.

31. **Group shared subjects, verbs, objects, predicates, or complements, whenever possible, in the same sentence**. Take a series of sentences of the form "*A x B*. *A y C*. *A z D*," where *A* is a subject, *x*, *y*, and *z* are verbs, and *B*, *C*, and *D* are objects. It is more economical and clearer to say, "*A x B*, *y C*, and *z D*." Thus compare

> The most satisfying French restaurants use ingredients of a quality almost unknown this country. These establishments combine their ingredients in more or less classic recipes. The superlative French restaurant also cooks, bakes, roasts, and otherwise prepares its food with great skill.

with

> The most satisfying French restaurants use ingredients of a quality almost unknown this country, combine them in more or less classic recipes, and cook, bake, roast, and otherwise prepare their food with great skill.

The point holds whenever subjects, verbs, objects, predicates, or complements can be "factored out." (The example factors out the subject.) Write the single sentence saying *A x D*, *E*, and *F* rather than the multiple ones saying *A x D*, *A x E*, and *A x F*; the single sentence saying *A*, *B*, and *C x D* rather than the multiple ones saying *A x D*, *B x D*, and *C x D*; etc. Note that writers violating this rule very commonly compound the error by elegant variation (see III.B.24), as in the example above. To relieve the tedium of saying, "*A x B*. *A y C*. *A z D*," when *A* is expressed in the same words each time, they vary the words for *A* (and sometimes also for *x*, *y*, and *z* and *B*, *C*, and *D*), thereby muddying the meaning still further.

C. Punctuation

1. **Serial expressions of the form "x, y, and z" should always have the final comma (before the "and")**. Omitting it risks confusion with the properly punctuated expression "*x*, *y* and *z*," in which "*y* and *z*" is appositive, modifying *x*, not adding coequal members of a series. In "Jones was strong, resolute and unyielding," "resolute" and "unyielding" amplify "strong"; in "Jones was strong, resolute, and unyielding," Jones was all three things, equally, with the second and third adding to rather than helping define the first.

2. **Use commas to separate serial (as distinct from nested) adjectives**. "Other more powerful factors," without a comma, implies you have already mentioned some more powerful factors and are now referring to others. If what you mean, however, is (in a clumsier locution) "other factors, which are more powerful [than those already mentioned]," you should say, "other, more powerful factors," with the comma.

3. **Separate independent clauses by commas**. "Gore interrupted Bush and hovered over him" needs no comma before "and" because the second clause is *dependent*. The *subject*, in the grammatical sense, is still Bush. But "the Bush campaign thwarted any further recounting, and Bush held on to his several-hundred-vote lead" needs its comma, because the second clause, with its own subject, is *independent*.

4. **Avoid *comma splices***. With rare exceptions (see III.B.3), independent clauses need joining by a conjunction (the "and" in the example at the end of the preceding paragraph), as well as a comma, or separation by a colon, semi-colon, or period. (See Follett, pp. 365-66.) "The first proposal to reform the Electoral College was introduced in 1797, more than 500 others have followed" is wrong. The comma alone is not enough to separate the two independent clauses. "The first proposal to reform the Electoral College was introduced in 1797, *and* more than 500 others have followed" is correct. To judge from papers past, the temptation to comma-splice is particularly acute when the sentence involves "however." A typical example is "Election campaigns have certainly changed, however, they have changed out of necessity." Splitting the sentence in two by changing the comma preceding "however" to a period would eliminate the grammatical problem but create an unattractive second sentence (in violation of III.B.11). A better solution is to replace "however, they have changed out" with "but," leaving "Election campaigns have certainly changed, but of necessity," which has the additional virtue of greater concision.

5. **Use dashes and parentheses sparingly**. Commas will often suffice. Parentheses indicate that what they enclose is parenthetical, an aside; commas give the enclosure more emphasis; dashes give it a great deal of emphasis.

6. **Don't put a comma after "and," "but," or "yet" at the beginning of a sentence, unless some other expression, immediately following, requires it**. The commas in "Yet, for all his efforts, he lost" are appropriate; the comma in "Yet, he lost" is not. The same applies to "thus" and "hence" at the beginnings of sentences.

7. **Prefer commas to semicolons for separating parallel clauses**. Again III.B.3. provides an example. Use semicolons only when the clauses are exceptionally long or contain internal commas.

8. **Observe the difference between *it's* and *its***. *It's* is the contraction for "it is"; *its* is the possessive of "it." Thus "it's a long road to Tipperary," but "the campaign staff somehow lost its candidate."

9. **The proper punctuation for citations involving *et al.* is of the form "(Murgatroyd et al., 1995)" or "Murgatroyd et al. (1995)."** There is no comma before and no period after *et*, which is unabbreviated Latin for "and." There is a period after *al*, which is short for the Latin *alia*, meaning "others."

IV. A Writer's Tools

A. Dictionaries and Thesauruses

The Oxford English Dictionary (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. The largest and most authoritative. You can get the Concise Edition—unabridged, just reduced to a print size that requires a magnifying glass—for about $200. One of the nice things about the *OED* is the abundance of examples, particularly helpful for judging the niceties of usage.

Webster's Third New International Dictionary. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1986. The next best thing to the *OED*. It also has a good many examples of words in use. About $90.

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1983. Perhaps the best of the standard desktop dictionaries.

Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases (Robert A. Dutch, ed.). New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965. Lots of publishers put out a "Roget's Thesaurus." This St. Martin's edition is the best I've encountered.

B. Guides to Style and Usage

William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* (3rd ed.). New York: Macmillan, 1979. A gem.

H. W. Fowler. *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (2nd ed., Ernest Gowers, ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965. A classic, though a bit dated and aimed at the other side of the Atlantic. N.B.: **Avoid** R.W. Burchfield, *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* (Oxford University Press, 1996), a largely different and wholly inferior book, actually at odds with Fowler on many points.

H.W. Fowler and E.G. Fowler. *The King's English* (3rd ed.). London: Oxford University Press, 1931. Another classic, though still more dated and equally aimed at the other side of the Atlantic.

Wilson Follett, *Modern American Usage* (ed. and completed by Jacques Barzun et al.). New York: Hill and Wang, 1966. A splendid book. The nearest American equivalent to Fowler.

Edward D. Johnson. *The Handbook of Good English*, New York: Facts on File, 1982. Good advice in mediocre prose.

Thomas S. Kane, *The New Oxford Guide to Writing*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. A worthwhile reference.

The Chicago Manual of Style (13th ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. Useful mainly for formatting.

C. Enrichment

Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable (Centenary ed., revised; Ivor H. Evans, ed.). New York: Harper & Row, 1981.

The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations (3rd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Bartlett's Familiar Quotations (15th ed., revised and enlarged, Emily Morison Beck, ed.). Boston: Little, Brown, 1980.

Shakespeare, the plays and sonnets. *The Riverside Shakespeare* (2nd ed.), J.J.M. Tobin, Herschel Baker, and G. Blakemore Evans, eds. (Houghton-Mifflin, 1997), is a well-annotated one-volume edition.

The Bible (King James Version).